



Cleaning up mercury spills

Exposure to mercury – even tiny amounts – may cause serious health problems. You can, however, safely clean up a spill at your home if the spill is small – less than one-quarter teaspoon or from a small thermometer. The spill must be limited to a small area and on a hard surface like tile, linoleum or wood. The spill also could be on a small area rug, blanket or clothing that could be thrown away.

If the spill is a larger amount or spread over a larger area, is in cracks, crevices or other difficult places to clean, you should consult professional help. Cleanup costs are the responsibility of the homeowner or business.

For more information on cleaning up mercury spills, please contact the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's Office of Environmental Community Health at **1-888-849-7241** or visit www.scdhec.gov/mercury.

NEVER, EVER...

A mercury spill is a serious issue. Here are some basic rules to follow if there is a small mercury spill – as defined above – at your home.

- NEVER use a vacuum cleaner to clean up mercury. The vacuum will put mercury into the air and increase exposure. In addition, the vacuum will be contaminated and have to be disposed of properly.

- NEVER use a broom to clean up mercury. It will break the mercury into smaller droplets and spread them.

- NEVER pour mercury down a drain. It may lodge in the plumbing and cause future problems during plumbing repairs. If discharged, it can cause pollution of the septic tank or sewage treatment plant.

- NEVER wash items contaminated with mercury in a washing machine. Mercury may contaminate the machine and/or pollute sewage.

- NEVER walk around if your shoes might be contaminated

with mercury. Take off your shoes before you leave the room where the spill occurred. Contaminated clothing can also spread mercury.

Cleaning Up a Small Spill

Mercury can be cleaned up easily from wood, linoleum, tile and any other smooth surfaces. If, however, a spill occurs on carpet, curtains, upholstery or similar surfaces, these contaminated items should be disposed of properly. Only cut and remove the affected portion of the contaminated carpet or fabric for disposal.

Here are the basic cleanup steps:

- Remove everyone from the area where cleanup will take place. Shut the door of impacted area. Turn off ventilation system. Do not allow children to help. Remember to remove all pets as well.
- Put on rubber or latex gloves.
- If there are any broken pieces of glass, pick them up with care. Place all broken pieces on a paper towel. Fold the paper towel and place it in a zip lock bag. Label the bag "MERCURY" with a permanent marker.

Things You'll Need to Clean Up a Spill

- four or five zip lock bags
- trash bags
- rubber or latex gloves
- paper towels
- squeegee or cardboard
- eyedropper
- shaving cream and small paintbrush or duct tape
- flashlight
- powdered sulfur (optional)

- Look for mercury beads. Use a squeegee or cardboard to gather the beads. Use slow sweeping motions to keep the beads from becoming uncontrollable. Turn the lights out in the room and use your flashlight and hold it at a low angle close to the floor to look for more beads that may be sticking to the floor surface or in cracks. **NOTE:** Mercury can move surprising distances on hard, flat surfaces. Inspect the entire room when searching.
- Use an eyedropper to collect the beads. Carefully squeeze the beads onto a damp paper towel. Place the paper towel in a zip lock bag and secure. Mark the bag "MERCURY" with a permanent marker.
- For a final cleanup, put shaving cream on a paint brush and gently dot the affected area to pick up smaller, hard-to-see beads. Another option is to use duct tape. Place the paintbrush

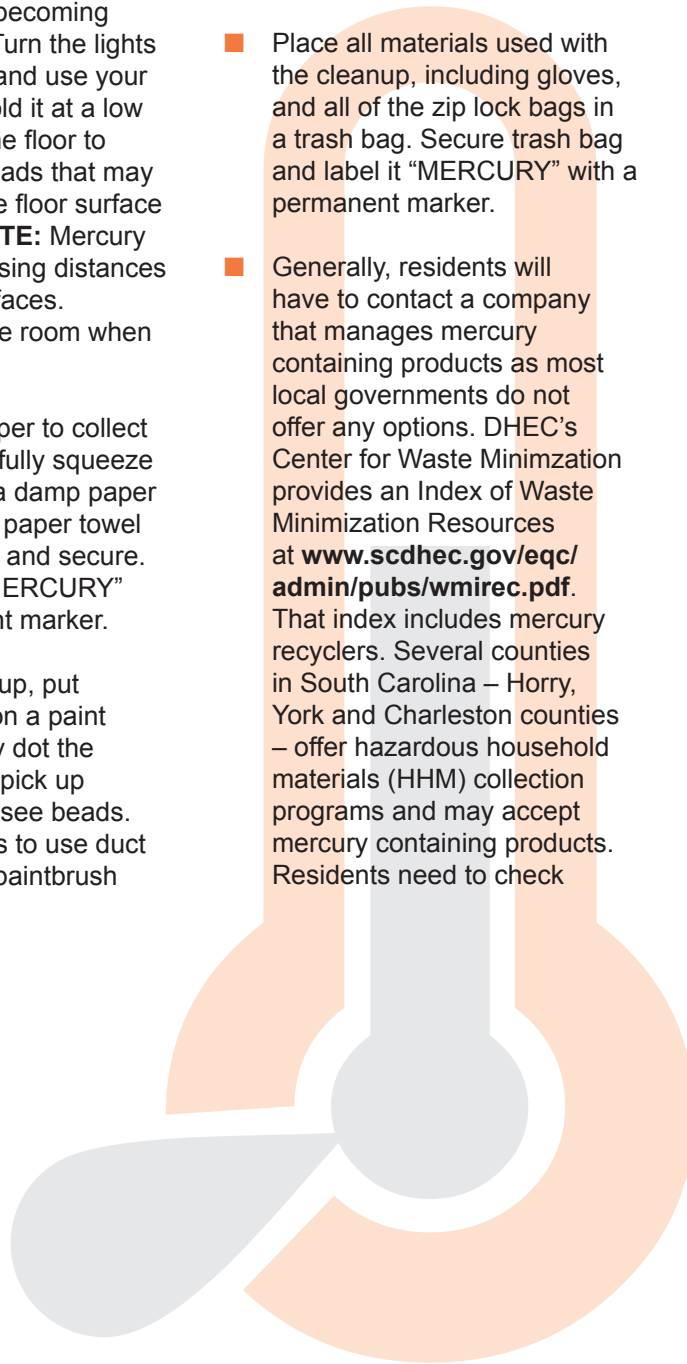
or duct tape in a zip lock bag and secure. Mark the bag "MERCURY" with a permanent marker.

- Place all materials used with the cleanup, including gloves, and all of the zip lock bags in a trash bag. Secure trash bag and label it "MERCURY" with a permanent marker.
- Generally, residents will have to contact a company that manages mercury containing products as most local governments do not offer any options. DHEC's Center for Waste Minimization provides an Index of Waste Minimization Resources at www.scdhec.gov/eqc/admin/pubs/wmirec.pdf. That index includes mercury recyclers. Several counties in South Carolina – Horry, York and Charleston counties – offer hazardous household materials (HHM) collection programs and may accept mercury containing products. Residents need to check

with recycling coordinators in those counties. In addition, other counties are considering adding HHM programs or offering HHM single-day collections. Residents are encouraged to check with their county recycling coordinator or solid waste director to see local options. A list of recycling coordinators is available at www.scdhec.gov/recycle/html/counties.html.

REMEMBER: Keep the area well ventilated to the outside (keep windows open and fans running) for at least 24 hours after your successful cleanup. Keep children and pets out of the cleanup area. If sickness occurs, seek medical attention immediately.

For more information about cleaning up a small mercury spill in your home or properly disposing of household products that contain mercury, visit www.epa.gov/mercury/disposal.htm or www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/mercury/disposal.htm.



For more information, visit www.scdhec.gov/mercury or call the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's Office of Environmental Community Health at 1-888-849-7241. Information for this fact sheet was provided courtesy of the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** and the **Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry**.